The construction of global management consulting - a study of consultancies' web presentations

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Summary

Management consulting increasingly appears as a global endeavour as reflected in the increasing dominance of a few large, global management-consulting firms. However, features of the consulting service (e.g. its immaterial and interactional character) as well as aspects of management (e.g. its cultural anchoredness) highlight the locality of management consulting.

In this paper we approach this tension between the global and the local by seeing consulting as involving the creation of generalised myths. More specifically, we ask the question:

How do global consulting companies construct the viability and desirability of their services?

Based on a view of management consultants as mythmakers, we study the argumentation on corporate web sites of four leading global consultancies in five different countries. Applying a framework based on the sociology of translation, we analyze the translation strategies used in making the service of global consultancies both viable and indispensable.

We find that the need for consultants is to a large extent constructed through defining management as an expert activity, thus creating a need for external advisors possessing globally applicable expert knowledge. In this effort, the consultants ally with three widely spread rationalized managerial myths – the rationality myth, the globalization myth and the universality myth.

We conclude, that global consulting firms are actively involved in creating and reinforcing the very same institutions, which are the prerequisites for their future success.

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Introduction

Management consultants role in the production and diffusion of management knowledge is deemed significant as they are seen as influencing and regulating activities across most aspects of organisational management (cf. Knights and Morgan, 1991; May, 1994; Furusten, 1995). The intangibility of the service performed by management consultants implies that convincing clients of the splendour of their ideas and solutions is a vital part of consultants' work. Therefore, it is argued, the consultants must actively take command of "the process by which images, impressions and perceptions of their value, and service quality is created" (Clark and Salaman, 1996 p.14). Service organisations such as management consulting firms are described as essentially "systems of persuasion" that by the use of language and rhetoric draw upon as well as create and offer institutionalised myths/rationality surrogates" (Alvesson, 1993). Consultancies in this tradition are seen operating as organizational "myth-makers", compensating for uncertainties due to the absence of rationality in the pursuit of management (ibid.). Clients accordingly make judgements about consultancies on the basis of the consultants' successful manipulation of generic symbols of expertise and of authority (Starbuck, 1992).

The industry for "myth-making", in the US as well as in Europe, is increasingly dominated by a few large global consulting firms, both in terms of revenues but also in terms of media attention (Kipping and Armbruster, 1999; Kubr, 1996). One way to see this development is as a consequence of the requirement of global clients, who want to be able to use the same consultancy with the same approach in change programs all over the world (The Economist, 1997). Another explanation focuses on size related advantages in knowledge creation and transfer (Kipping and Scheybani, 1994). Increasing size provides increasing opportunities to build knowledge within the organization, as consulting assignments are seen as the main

source of learning within consulting companies (Savary, 1999; The Economist, 1997; Hansen, Nohria and Tierney, 1999).

However, both these rationalistic explanations rest on the assumption of management as an increasingly standardised activity, taking place in an increasingly globalised world (cf. Meyer, 2000). Only when assumed, that knowledge gained in a project in e.g. Brazil is valuable and applicable in a project in Sweden, the global firm has an advantage in terms of superior possibilities to generate knowledge. Assumptions like these enable management consultants to argue in favour of de-contextualized and standardised models of successful or elite organizations across markets and countries (Meyer, 1994).

There are simultaneously aspects of management consulting which could be argued to counteract the emergence of large global actors. It can for instance be claimed that management consulting deals with a very local phenomenon – management – in which local variations are large. The large body of research on cross cultural management has repeatedly argued, that management is a local practice, to a large extent determined by local preconditions in terms of institutional settings, attitudes, values, etc. (Hofstede, 1982; Whitley, 1992). Research on multinational organizations also points at empirical findings that the attributes of local environments, i.e. local organizations and external networks, play an important role in reducing the influence of economic considerations within global firms (Ghoshal and Westney, 1993). The "local" character of management consulting is also emphasised by the characteristics of the management consulting service, namely immateriality, heterogeneity and interaction (Clark and Salaman, 1996; Norrmann, 1983).

Both the *immaterial* as well as the *interactional* characteristics highlight the importance of the client's trust in the consultancy (Edvardsson, 1990). As trust is a culturally relative phenomenon, and to a large extent dependent on an overlap between the consultant's and the client's values and norms, the success of the consulting service can be argued to be dependent

on its local adaptation (Bergholz, 1999; Greiner and Metzger, 1983). *Heterogeneity* in turn refers to the extent to which the service itself can be standardized and thereby the amount of discretion available when fulfilling the terms of a contract. Management consultants are argued to have considerable discretion with regard to the fulfilment of their tasks, thus questioning the possibility to standardize it on a global level (cf. Clark and Salaman, 1996).

Against this background, the global management consulting service becomes problematic. Universal knowledge claims stand against the local characteristics of both management and the consulting service. At the very least there is reason to assume that the consulting firms' universal knowledge coexists with strong needs for global firms to create legitimacy by being receptive to the locality of national markets (cf. Goshal and Bartlet, 1993:283). This paper examines how legitimacy for the global consulting service is created in this field of tension between the global and universal and the local and specific. The question posed is thus:

How do global consulting companies construct the viability and desirability of their services?

Viewing management consulting firms as "systems of persuasion", we focus on the rhetorical construction of the global consulting service as reflected on consulting companies web presentations. The World Wide Web is today an important means of communication for management consulting firms as reflected in the effort put into the development of this medium. All the large consulting firms have vast web sites consisting of thousands of pages directed both at potential clients and potential recruits.

In the following, we will sketch out a framework for understanding the construction of facts. Based on the content of the web presentations, the strategies and arguments used by the consultants in constructing the global consultancy as a viable service are then discussed. These strategies involve the simultaneous creation of the managerial task, the client and the

consultant. The paper is concluded with a discussion of three managerial myths underpinning the global consulting service.

Understanding the construction of "facts"

In approaching the question of how global consulting companies construct the viability and desirability of their services, we depart from the sociology of translation as a way to understand the construction of "facts" - taken for granted meanings (Latour, 1987; Callon, 1986). This body of theory looks at given "facts" as the result of ongoing collective processes in which different allies (scientists, engineers, users, etc.) as well as artifacts (measuring methods, literature, etc.) are linked together in networks with a shared interest in creating and ultimately protecting a specific "fact" from being questioned. In enrolling allies in a network, the process of translation is central. This is the process in which one actor persuades other actors of their interest in participating in and supporting a certain network.

A central aspect of the translation process, which has special relevance for this study, is the process of problematization (Callon, 1986) In this process, actors are enrolled in an emerging network around a created problem, and the respective roles of the different actors are determined. Through rhetorical moves, links between the problems of one actor and those of another are created in a way in which the actors become bound together in a network aiming to solve a common problem. One actor often orchestrates the creation of problems and associated roles in order to position him/herself as "obligatory passage point". Actors having the created problem thus have to go through a specific actor in the network in order to have it solved. In the case of global management consulting, this means translating the client's perceived situation to one that is problematic and solvable only by the services offered by a global consulting firm. It is about creating a view of the client as someone in need of a

specific kind of assistance, as well as of the consultant as someone being able to give the needed kind of assistance.

In choosing a constructionist perspective (Berger and Luckman, 1967), focusing on the rhetorical creation of the global consulting service, we hope to add a dimension to the existing studies on global consulting. These studies are generally based on a realistic perspective highlighting aspects like client demands and economies of scale in knowledge production (Hansen et al., 1999; Sarvary, 1999; Kipping, 1994), which highlight the universal character of the management consulting service rather than its local specificity. By focusing on the rhetorical creation of the global consulting company, we wish to contribute to a deeper understanding of the increasing demand for global management consulting as well as of consultants' relation to rationalized assumptions and myths.

The latter is called for since empirical research on the process of "myth-making" i.e. management consultants' potential role as producers or creators of knowledge, is scarce and often lacks explicity. Meyer et al. (1987:12), discuss the process of institutionalization in general terms as a process, by which a "given set of units and pattern of activities come to be normatively and cognitively held in place, and practically taken for granted as lawful (whether as a matter of formal law, custom, or knowledge)". How institutions in turn are created and changed is not spelled out, thereby highlighting what is seen as a limitation of the neo-institutional perspective of being (too) general.

(Re)producing the global management consulting firm

Given the increasing importance of the Internet as a means for organizations to communicate with their constituents, we have chosen to focus our study on the construction of the global consulting service in a number of large, global consultancies' web presentations. The web presentations of McKinsey, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), Andersen Consulting (now

Accenture) and KPMG in five different countries have been studied. These companies are among the largest firms in the respective markets studied (Kipping et al, 1999).

The local – global dimension in focus in this paper can be rephrased into a "US – local" dimension, as the majority of large global consulting firms are US-based. Consequently, the global consulting companies' US market web-sites are an important reference point in this study. In studying local adaptation, we focus on the actions of these firms on the European market. We therefore also choose to study the three single largest European markets UK, Germany and France as well as Sweden, one of Europe's most consulting intensive markets (Kipping and Armbrüster, 1999; FEACO, 2000; Garcia, 1998; Keeble and Schwalbach, 1995).

In total 17 web presentations were analyzed (BCG did not have local web-sites in all the studied countries). Most were of a general character thus aimed at different kinds of constituents, but some of the local (non US-sites) were explicitly stated to be recruitment sites.

Management consulting - a truly global service

The US represents the center of the Web-site structure of the studied consulting firms. In all cases, the US site (.com)[2] is the most comprehensive relative the other national sites, who generally show great resemblance to the US site in terms of layout and content. KPMG is the only example of an organization that in some aspects conveys different images across national sites. The following statement best exemplifies these variations:

> "Every market is different – in some cases we can draw on our network – in others not."
> (www.eu.kpmg.net)

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[2] The analysis of the different web-sites is carried out in May 2000.

A recurring theme in the studied companies web presentations is their global presence and the global character of their services. All firms underline that they are a global or international consulting firm. The global character of these companies is also reflected in their recurring descriptions of being "world leaders" in their respective businesses. KPMG describes itself as "the emerging global leader for Internet Integration services" (www.kpmg.com), McKinsey as "the worlds leading management consulting company" (www.mckinsey.se) and BCG as "one of the worlds leading consultancies" (www.bcg.de).

More or less implicit in these references to globality is the view that a global reach contributes to the consultancies' knowledge stock. McKinsey, BCG and Andersen Consulting all describe how they make use of their global knowledge in projects, and how dedicated global competence-groups continuously work with the development of approaches and expertise in different areas of specialty. The global applicability of the approaches and expertise is largely taken for granted, as reflected in the design of AC's general operating model based on competencies rather than locations:

> Our operating model, based on competencies rather than locations, helped deliver the capabilities clients needed. As a result, the new firm skyrocketed to the top of the industry (www.ac.com)

Deserting a model in which national specifics were considered important is thus described as an important explanation for the success of AC. Similarly, McKinsey on its web presentations repeatedly and consistently emphasizes the cumulated knowledge, skills, creativity and experience of McKinsey's consultants all over the world. These different skills and knowledge are brought together in a team-based approach to working with problems. The knowledge base is treated as inherently global as geography as a variable in this context is presented as less important than competencies:

> We feel.....the key to an effective team lies in mixing them according to competence rather
> than geography. Therefore, many of our consultants work for longer or shorter periods in
> projects in other countries (www.mckinsey.se – our translation)

The local facets of consulting knowledge are thus actively downplayed in the consulting companies' presentations. The localness and specificity of each consulting assignment is in most cases treated superficially in terms of the consultant's ability to create value based on their (global) knowledge. The contextual aspects of the clients' problem are dealt with by emphasizing the need for creating solutions that fit the specific client organization. This indicates a view, in which there exist standard solutions, which, in order to "work", are adapted to the specific context:

> In achieving results, intellectual rigor, independence of thought, vision and creativity are
> vital; but we never forget that the ideal solution is the one which works in the real world.
> That is why, as well as assessing the benefits of a strategy for the client in the marketplace,
> we also take great care to assess the fit of the strategy to the client's specific needs.
> (www.ac.com)

We can thus conclude, that the global consulting companies in favor of the global and universal character of their service largely downplay the local and situation specific aspects of the management consluting service. In the next section we turn to the rhetorical strategies employed in order to make this kind of global service viable. This involves the simultaneous construction of the managerial task, the client as well as the consultant in a way that establish the global consultant as an obligatory passage point.

Translating the problem of business success

Management consultants on their web-presentations tend to make strong promises to their potential clients. Looking at the service offered as reflected in the companies' stated mission, the consultants present their services as more or less vital for the client's survival. McKinsey offers "Substantial and lasting improvements in performance" (www.mckinsey.co.uk) Andersen consulting promises to "help clients create their future" (indicating that without AC

they might not have one) (www.ac.com) and BCG offers to "create and sustain competitive advantage" (www.bcg.com).

The issues addressed by the consultants can be expected to be on the top of the agenda of senior managers – but why should they turn to consultants to handle them? How do the consultants translate these general issues into problems in the solution of which they play a natural and important role? A first part in this translation is the establishment of management as an expert activity.

Management as an expert activity

In the consultants' descriptions of their offerings to their clients, a number of problems that the clients are assumed to have, are highlighted. These problems reflect a view of management as an activity based on expert knowledge. Both the design of a successful organization and the implementation of this design are expressed as requiring expert knowledge. More specifically, the consultants underline the following shortcomings on behalf of the clients:

Lack of sufficient expertise and state of the art knowledge. All consultants claim they can offer expert knowledge based both on own research and experience as well as tapping the general ongoing knowledge development. AC looks upon the consulting assignment like an engineering task, bringing the right expertise from the organization's competence groups together in order to design the best solution.

> Our capacity to answer efficiently and precisely to our clients' needs is based on deep
> expertise of different industries and some cross-industries expertises. (www.ac.com/fr)

At McKinsey, the consultants represent the most important source of knowledge. Consultants are assembled in teams whose composition is the key to tapping the necessary knowledge. A similar strategy is found in BCG where the consultants are tied together in networks of

"select areas of expertise… structured around industrial sectors and business functions, as well as key issues that are relevant to both." (www.bcg.com).

Inability to translate state of the art knowledge to workable/practical solutions. Translating existing knowledge to workable and practical solutions is described as a key contribution by the consultants. All studied web-sites emphasize the consultancies' ability to go from expert knowledge to solutions that "work". McKinsey notes "That knowledge per se is of limited value until people and consulting skill combine to make it valuable." (www.mckinsey.com) AC underlines their "pragmatic" approach noting that they take great care to assess the fit of the strategy to the client's specific needs" (www.ac.com). This indicates a view, in which there exist standard solutions, which, in order to "work", are adapted to the specific context:

Lack of rigorous approaches. Consultants have well-tested methodologies for achieving the promised results in the client organization. These approaches ensure better results of both analyses as well as implementation work than the client could have achieved otherwise. AC conveys a large belief in its formalized approaches driving different aspects of the change process. The existence of such approaches is repeatedly described as a success factor:

> Change management's unique, proven, comprehensive methodology for managing change
> enables us to help clients achieve superior human performance…(www.ac.com/fr)

Here, the individual consultant's knowledge is downplayed. Instead, company knowledge and approaches are focused.

Lack of objectivity. Consultants offer a neutral as well as an objective view of the organization. Management is seen as too heavily involved in the organization to be able to see new solutions. "Maintaining independence and objectivity" is stated as an important professional value at McKinsey and the consultant is described as a "coach contributing with working methods and an outsider's objective perspective" (www.mckinsey.com). At KPMG

the importance of "clear thinking" (www.kpmg.com) exemplifies the importance of maintaining an objective view of the client and his organization.

Lack of analytical skills and creativity. Consultants are experts in analysis. They have methods and approaches as well as superior brainpower. These resources ensure better and more creative solutions to the client's problems. BCG describes its mission as helping "leading corporations create and sustain competitive advantage" (www.bcg.com). For BCG, this means creating and delivering "fundamental insights"

> Although the field of strategy has evolved since then, for us it has always involved working
> with clients to understand the fundamental dynamics of their businesses: what creates value
> and what drives competitive advantage (www.bcg.com).

Consequently, BCG sees as their task not to accept the client's definition of a problem but to deliver breakthrough solutions by bringing analytical rigor, objectivity and new perspectives. Innovation and creativity are implicit central notions of the problem solving capacity of their individual consultants. These do not derive from the local contextuality but rather from the opposite, by bringing in analytical rigor.

The above list of shortcomings on behalf of the client reflects what Schön (1983) calls a technical rationality, which to a large extent is taken for granted in today's western societies, and especially in business life. This technical rationality is characterized by three dichotomies – means vs. ends, research vs. practice and knowing vs. doing. All these dichotomies are clearly reflected in the problems, which the consultant promises to solve for the client. The idea of formalized approaches for problem solving presupposes, that a certain problem (ends) can be solved by a certain approach (means). The focus on expertise and state of the art knowledge reflects the research vs. practice dichotomy and finally, the problem of translating knowledge into action is a reflection of the knowing vs. doing dichotomy, where the consultants present themselves as actors able to transcend this dichotomy. In fact by constructing management as an expert activity, rationality reflects not only a means but also

an ends for the modern organization (cf. Brunsson, 1999). Underlining the rational aspects of management implies that modern management knowledge is of value and validity beyond local settings, which in turn is a precondition for global consultancies.

The client as legitimate help taker

Given this depiction of management as an expert activity, we now turn to the creation of the client as a "legitimate help taker". How is the client's role constructed in order to render it in the client's interest to hire global management consultants?

The above-identified shortcomings with regard to the client reflect the movement towards an increasingly rationalized society in which knowledge is presented as complex and specialized, and where responsible actors consult experts (Meyer and Jepperson, 1999; Alvesson, 1993). Taking help of consultants is nothing to be ashamed of, in fact all successful companies do, it is argued on the web-sites. BCG even incorporates this idea in its mission, which is to "help *leading* corporations…" (www.bcg.com). Similarly, McKinsey describes itself as:

> Giving advice in the most important questions to the top management of *leading* organizations and businesses. (www.mckinsey.se)

All consultancies also refer to examples of their engagements at well-known and successful organizations. Seeking consultant advice is thus no sign of weakness, but rather a prerequisite for success. In the increasingly complex and global business world, the use of experts has become not only accepted but a vehicle for gaining legitimacy. The management of a progressive and efficient organization is expected to rely on external experts of different kinds (Alvesson, 1993; Meyer, 1996).

This above-described rationalization of management thus involves the simultaneous creation of objective (global) business knowledge and the depreciation of local knowledge and

understanding. However, the issues addressed by the consultants – creating the future, bringing about lasting and substantial improvements, as well as ensuring competitive advantage – are traditionally seen as on-going business within the organization and ultimately the responsibility of the organization's management. One would assume that knowledge relevant to the creation of the future etc. is at hand within the client-organization. But this kind of local knowledge is rarely mentioned as a resource in the consultants' work. Only McKinsey, and to some extent KPMG specifically mention contextual knowledge as a resource in their assignments. Consequently, two different views of the client can be identified in the web-presentations analyzed in this paper.

The first, which is most clearly represented by McKinsey, views the client as basically capable of carrying out his management task. McKinsey is very clear that the responsibility for the organization's success or failure is the client's, and the client is attributed at least some expertise when it comes to knowing his own company. McKinsey presents its mission as to "help our clients make substantial and lasting improvements in their performance …" (www.mckinsey.co.uk). The client in this context plays an important role for bringing reality into the assignment and is viewed as responsible for the success – or failure – of the consulting assignment:

> We expect clients to make decisions and believe they deserve all the credit, or blame, for whatever results from our involvement. (www.mckinsey.com)

The consultant's role is to *serve* the client. He/she is described as a coach contributing with working methods and an outsider's objective perspective. Considering the increasingly complex and globalized world, the localness of the manager's expertise and knowledge is of limited use. He or she will be in need of external expertise and here McKinsey offers its services.

The second view of the client, most clearly represented by AC, is more pessimistic with regard to the client's own capabilities, therefore making an even stronger claim on the role of the client as a help taker. In improving the performance of organizations, AC takes on a large responsibility for the results as the design and realization in practice of the solution is described to be mainly the consultant's responsibility. AC is quite clear in offering the client solutions to his problems, indicating the client's incapability of solving them.

> Our clients come to us because they trust us to deliver sustainable and often dramatic transformations in performance. (www.ac.com/fr)

Also BCG depicts the client as relatively passive by claiming to play an important role in both the analysis as well as the implementation process. Implicitly, the consultants view the implementation of the results of their analysis as their responsibility:

> We consider clients' problems from multiple angles, develop options they hadn't previously considered, and recommend paths they should take. But we don't stop there. A strategy that is not implemented is merely a clever idea. We strive to ensure that our clients internalize the strategies we have developed together and organize to put them into practice. (www.bcg.com)

The client is thus presented as being in need of assistance and the consultants as the ones able to provide this assistance. The client's knowledge or expertise is only seldom acknowledged as a vital resource in solving the client's own problem. This implicit declaration of incapability of the client, which, presented in this way seems quite blunt, is however readily accepted by the client as reflected in their buying of the service. This view of the client is also not only limited to web presentations. Studies of consultants' contacts with their clients reveal similar assumptions (Bloomfield, 1992; Werr, 1999).

One way to understand the acceptance of this kind of logic is as a way of constructing a desirable image of the managerial role. Hiring global management consultants offering expert advice enforces the view of management as an expert underlining the rational aspects as well as the universal applicability of the knowledge of a modern manager. In defining their offer

of solving the client's business problems, the consultants on their web-presentations thus also offer an image of the managerial role to their clients - they describe "why they are important, why they matter and why their skills are important" (Clark and Salaman, 1998:153). Allying with global experts is also presented as a transfer of skills, which enhances the participating managers relative importance, and as a way to boost their respective careers. As McKinsey puts it:

> We usually include managers in our team, often working side-by side with them to do the detailed analytical work. This helps both win the commitment to the teams recommendation and to develop their own skills and knowledge for the benefit of their organization. (www.mckinesy.co.uk)

BCG further notes:

> We are committed to the success of our clients not only as institutions but also as individuals. We want the executives we work with to view their project with BCG as defining moments in their career. (www.bcg.com)

The depiction of the client manager as in need of consulting advice thus simultaneously reinforces the importance of the managerial role - if I only get the right advice, I can make this company successful - as well as highlights its challenging and knowledge intensive character - this is so difficult that I need the support of global experts.

The global consultant as legitimate expert

As a consequence of the client being involved in an activity that requires a large and constantly developing body of expert knowledge, a role for external expert advisors is created. Two strategies can be observed in order to legitimize the expert status of the consultants. A first strategy focuses on the consultants' personal characteristics claiming, "You need our brilliant individuals". A second strategy focuses on the consultants' hard "knowledge", claiming, "You need our expert knowledge" as well as our ability to make value of this knowledge. These two strategies are employed in parallel, although they may be

viewed as incommensurable (Berglund and Werr, 2000). However, the latter, focusing on expert knowledge was the clearly dominating one.

"You need our brilliant individuals"

A first way of emphasizing the consultants' expert knowledge is through reference to "outstanding" employees. Especially McKinsey and BCG emphasize their exceptional employees. Educational background, analytical ability, creativity, as well as outspokenness and honesty are described as key success factors. The web presentations of McKinsey repeatedly and consistently emphasize the cumulated knowledge, skills, creativity and experience of McKinsey's consultants:

> Successes and achievements start in a bright head. McKinsey strives at uniting as many
> exceptional personalities as possible in the firm. This diversity is the basis of our success.
> (www.mckinsey.de)

Different skills and knowledge in the consultancy are brought together in a team-based approach to working with problems. The composition of the teams, in which the consulting assignments are carried out, is the key to tapping the necessary knowledge.

"You need our expert knowledge and ability to make use of it"

A second approach to establish the consultants' legitimacy as an expert is through claiming the structure of the consulting organization as being based on (expert) knowledge. All consultancies state that an important dimension of their organization structure is competence based: they all have networks of consultants committed to accumulating and developing expert knowledge in different domains. AC even goes as far as describing the elements of its basic organization structure as "competencies". These competencies are strategy, change management, process and technology.

The impression of the consultants' superior knowledge is further fortified by highlighting links to academia, which represents a powerful rhetorical tool. As expressed by Meyer (1994:39) "The testimony of the sciences, represented by professional consultants of all stripes, is a powerful sort of rationalization (claiming a kind of universal scope) and impulse to organizing."

McKinsey allies with academia through the frequent use of citations from books, business magazines, and individuals. This is a rhetorical strategy common to strengthen ones argument in academia (Latour, 1987). Legitimacy from academia is also borrowed by referring to links to this Mecca of knowledge; BCG promotes its "strategy institute" in the following terms:

> The Strategy Institute breaks down barriers between business and academia, where people often ask similar questions—What do we really see and what is the meaning of the things we see? What can we learn from seeing the same issue through different academic "lenses"? (www.bcg.com)

In enforcing their expert status, global consultancies take for granted and thereby enforce the assumption of "global business knowledge". Their knowledge is implicitly presented as objective and global, thereby implying its universal validity:

> McKinsey consultants share the latest management ideas and techniques, enabling us to apply the best thinking of over 4,000 colleagues in over 80 offices and 43 countries. (www.McKinsey.uk)

In presenting their examples, knowledge and expertise are generally described as something impersonal, possessed by the consulting organization. In illustrating its "break-through thinking" BCG refers to the experience curve, the investment portfolio model as well as Time Based Management (TBM), concepts which are included in management education all over the world. In AC, individual consultants are completely missing as actors possessing knowledge. Instead, "competencies", being a part of the global organization structure, are presented as actors:

> The Strategy Competency assists clients in formulating business strategies and aligning
> their organization, business process and information technology architecture with these
> strategies. (www.ac.com/fr)

The cultural relativity of management knowledge is not only implicitly rejected by the above descriptions of the consultants' knowledge base, but also on some occasions explicitly described as irrelevant. McKinsey mentions Nasa, the Vatikan as well as the Frankfurt Stock Exchange in the same sentence as examples of their clients. Such a presentation conveys a strong sense of the global and universal validity of McKinsey knowledge and approaches. Both McKinsey and AC dismiss the knowledge category "culture" as being irrelevant, even counteracting the effective utilization of the consultancies' knowledge.

Universal knowledge, however, appears to have its limitations, as reflected in the consultants' efforts to underline the *practical* value of their knowledge. In underlining practicality, the local dimension of knowledge is reintroduced, indicating that universal knowledge *per se* is not enough to solve the client's problem. As noted earlier, the efforts towards constructing global consulting services appear mainly aimed at reducing the relevance of geographical boundaries (e.g. the nation state). Instead, other categories than geography are introduced as important domains of knowledge. These domains of knowledge, which are listed in Table 1, are also reflected in the consultancies' organizational structures.

McKinsey	BCG	AC	KPMG
Industry	Industry sectors	Industry	Industry
Functions	Business functions	Technology	Functional experience
	Key issues relevant to both	"Competencies" (strategy, change mgmt)	

Table 1. Knowledge domains referred to in the different consultancies

Table 1 reveals the knowledge domains "industry" and "function" as recurring in all companies. Both McKinsey and Andersen consulting explicitly state these categories to be

more relevant, and thus more appropriate in terms of organizing and operating principle for the consultancy, than the category "geography". This kind of "enlargement of market" involves seeing larger domains than local national markets (e.g. the industry or the world) as the locus of action and competition (Meyer, 2000). This indicates that these global firms take for granted that industries operate according to a set of distinct rules or laws that are seen more relevant than culture- and context specifics of the client organization (cf. Reed, 1996).

A further contextualization of the consulting knowledge towards the individual assignment is only touched upon superficially. Most consultancies acknowledge this aspect, but treat it only briefly through emphasizing that they produce change and results that work in reality (McKinsey), are pragmatists driven by results (AC), or turn knowledge into value (KPMG). For KPMG, the industry specialization is seen as a guarantee for creating customized solutions. However, beyond the acknowledgement that adaptation to the specific project has to be made, not much is said about how this is achieved. Local adaptation is to a large extent de-emphasized and treated as a non-issue.

In referring to their knowledge, management consultants thus attempt to structure the domain of management knowledge in accordance with their global presence. The category "national culture" is dismissed or downplayed in favor of more "enlarged" categories, such as industry or function. This implies that the transcendence of the nation state as a knowledge category and its replacement by other, inherently global knowledge categories, is an important translation strategy applied by the global management consulting firm, as it gives this an advantage over local firms. This point is supported by the fact that "industry" seems to be a knowledge category mainly exploited by global consultancies. In a study of the Swedish market for management consultants, the notion of "industry" is not emphasized as a knowledge category by local consultancies (Bäcklund, 2000).

The above analysis of the simultaneous discursive creation of the management, the client and the consultant on the consultants' web pages reveals a strong reliance on a rationalistic logic depicting management as knowledge based expert activity, which in turn creates the client's need for advice from global experts. This strong reliance on a rationalistic logic is somewhat surprising given e.g. Alvesson's (1993) observation, that IT consultants to a large extent de-emphasize "hard" knowledge in favor of their personal characteristics and skills. Similarly, studies of guru discourse highlight that a popular picture of the manger is that of the entrepreneurial manager, who assumes a moral rather than a rational character. The success of the manager in the gurus' discourse is dependent on charisma, vision, energy and courage rather than rational expert knowledge (Clark and Salaman, 1998; du Gay, 1994a; 1994b; Huczynski, 1993; Furusten, 1995).

It thus seems, as if at least two partly conflicting images of the manager exist side by side in the public discourse. Whereas guru theory highlights the personal traits of a heroic manager, the consultants on their web presentations create a picture of the manager as an expert acting rationally and knowledge based. This plurality of images is no problem in the every day life of practice, where incommensurates are constantly blended in ongoing process of translation in which the world is constructed (Latour, 1993). Not the least management consultants in their everyday rhetoric freely blend these two images of the manager and their underlying assumptions, which render them a rhetorically strong position (Berglund and Werr, 2000).

However, the consultant's reliance on a rational image of the manger on their web presentations is well understandable given the product they sell. The viability of the global management consulting service is build upon an expert logic, which identifies expert knowledge as a main asset in successful management. As noted above, expert knowledge is the main basis of legitimacy of the global consulting organization. An entrepreneurial image of the manager just doesn't create the same possibilities for a global consulting service. If the

success of management is dependent on the manager's personal characteristics, there is no market for global knowledge based advisory services.

Allying with rationalized myths

In reproducing the image of management as a rational, knowledge-based activity the consultants have a strong backing of three rationalized global myths - the rationality myth, the globalization myth and the universality myth (Meyer, 1994). By allying with these taken for granted myths, the translation of the problem of business success as one of managers' expert knowledge is protected from being questioned.

The rationality myth

Both in creating the respective roles of the consultant and the client, as well as in defining the knowledge base of the consultancies, there are implicit assumptions of management as science (c.f. Huczynski, 1993:193-194). This emanates from the ongoing rationalization of society at large, which includes creating and seeing organizations in terms of means-ends relationships and standardized systems of control over activities and actors (Scott and Meyer, 1994). Involved is also the now dominating norm of seeing scientific rationality as a universal guiding principle for all action, with its manifestations in specialization and the forming of formal expertise. As Meyer and Jepperson (2000:6) put it; "In Western culture, nature is tamed and demystified through the extraordinary development, expansion, and authority of science". KPMG, for instance, is explicit about how lay-, general knowledge is "no longer sufficient":

> Being a generalist in offering professional services is no longer sufficient. The market, our clients, demand industry expertise. (www.kpmg.se)

Rather, more scientific knowledge, in the form of expertise, is called for (see also Sarvary, 1999). This view of knowledge makes it legitimate for the manager to ask for help, as

"Responsible individual and social actors are to take scientific knowledge into account in their activities" (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000:9).

The scientification of management knowledge is also a prerequisite for the establishment of truly global, specialized, context-independent, and objective business knowledge legitimating the idea of global consulting teams assembling their respective expertise into objective and best solutions. Also the knowledge development in global knowledge groups depends on a scientific and rational view of management knowledge. Thus only in this perspective is the global firms' strive for economies of scale related to knowledge, viable.

The globalization myth

A second important ally tied up in the translation process enabling the global consulting company is the globalization myth. This myth further strengthens the idea of management knowledge as having relevance beyond national and cultural boundaries as well as of the world as an increasingly interconnected and globalized place. The notion of globalization is seen involving forces that undermine the relevance of national arenas and markets as well as the assumption that organizations in different settings are more similar than in the past (Strang and Meyer, 1993).

Globalization is not, however, primarily seen as a new form of substantive locality in which actors must function but rather as a development increasing competitive pressures for efficiency and rationality. Factors on the web-sites that reinforce this tendency include referring to rapid technological change, deregulation, homogenization of client needs and preferences (cf. Kostecki, 1999:12). One example is expressed by AC as they refer to "the dramatically increased pace and unpredictability of change in today's business environment" (www.ac.com). BCG in turn assists their clients to "tackle their most perplexing issues those with no obvious answers and high levels of uncertainty" (www.bcg.com). These expanded

markets involve new and increased uncertainties for participants and therefore require much more effective decision-making, control, and activity than were needed in national markets (Meyer, 2000). Globalization as a myth consequently brings new uncertainty (of a highly rationalized sort), which responsible organizations need to deal with (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000). One way of dealing with these new challenges is by hiring experts such as management consultants, adhering to the norms of rationality (Alvesson, 1993). The globalization myth, and the increased complexity this introduces, thus supports the creation of the client as a "legitimate help taker". The world has become too complex to be handled without the help of experts.

The universality myth

The third modern myth or assumption found reflecting globalization as well as being closely related to the myth of rationality is that of universality. Universality involves more generalized claims of authority reflecting the assumption that rationalized models of management can be de-contextualized and successfully implemented in organizations regardless of their national- and culture specifics (Meyer, 1994). This, for global consulting firms important assumption, means that the knowledge developed in an assignment in one setting (e.g. country), is applicable in another. As stated by BCG: "At BCG, we have amassed a wealth of continually evolving business knowledge from our experience working on critical issues in numerous industries." (www.bcg.com) Consequently, the knowledge created within a consulting company is assumed to have universal relevance, which means that the local environments are simply not enough. Differences related to national culture geographical context etc. consequently are regarded less relevant and important for solving the client's problems.

Conclusions

The global management consulting company is a phenomenon of growing interest. Not only do these companies play an increasing role in increasing numbers of client organizations, they are often also argued to be important actors in the definition of good management practice, thereby influencing the business world far beyond their direct clients. However, the viability of a global consulting service is problematic, given both the local character of management knowledge pointed out in e.g. the literature on cross cultural management as well as the characteristics of the consulting service according to which the creation of value in consulting is largely dependent on the local interaction between consultant and client in the specific consulting project.

This latent tension between the local and global in management consulting makes the discursive construction of the global consulting service an interesting issue, which in this paper is explored in terms of an analysis of 4 global consultancies' web presentations in five different countries. Focus is directed towards the translation strategies through which the management consultants establish themselves as obligatory passage points in relation to both the managerial task as well as the manager.

The results show that the consultancies present themselves as truly global actors, offering global services on a global market. Local aspects of the consulting service were either neglected or only devoted marginal attention. The establishment of this global consulting service involved the simultaneous construction of management, the client and the consultant. By establishing management as knowledge based expert activity, the manager was defined as a legitimate help taker. Given the knowledge intensity of the managerial task, it becomes legitimate to acquire the help of experts being at the forefront of knowledge development - i.e. global management consultants. Consequently, the consultant is constructed as an expert,

and much effort is put into legitimizing the consultant's possession of expert knowledge. This expert knowledge is generally defined in terms of global rather than local knowledge. Geography is actively dismissed as a knowledge category in favor of more global categories such as "industry" and "function".

Central in this process of translation is the establishment of management as knowledge based expert activity, as it is this move, which ties the interests of the consultant and the client together in a way establishing the consultant as an obligatory passage point. For the client, this makes the consultant indispensable in two ways. Firstly keeping updated on the latest management knowledge by hiring a global consultant is a way to business success. Secondly, the hiring of consultants enforces a desirable image of the manager as an influential expert in the organization. Hereby, management consultants contribute to the solving of both aspects of the "double control problem" faced by mangers - the problem of managing their personal identities as well as contributing to the control of their organizations (Watson, 1994).

For the consultant, the creation of management as based on expert knowledge is a central prerequisite for the knowledge-based argumentation underlying the viability of a global management consultant. The success in this pursuit reflects the "death" of the nation-state as well as national culture as important areas of competence in management, and its replacement by the category "industry". This includes the active reconstruction of "industry" from a local to a global entity.

The stability of this translation binding the client and the global management consulting firm together is enforced through the creation of allies with a number of rationalized managerial myths, more specifically, the rationality myth, the globalization myth, and the universality myth. These myths underpin the creation of management as an expert activity and thereby protect it from being questioned. However, by relying on these myths, the consultants on their web presentations also reinforce them. Global management consultants thus to a large

extent are actively involved in creating and reinforcing the very same institutions, which are important prerequisites for legitimating their future existence. The global management-consulting firms have thus managed to become winners by aligning to, acting as co-creators of, and reinforcing the notion of society as an increasingly globalized and rationalized place. Globalized, not as a new form of substantive locus but as increasing competitive pressures for efficiency and rationality. Universal and rational knowledge rather than local knowledge is consequently seen as overwhelmingly important for solving business problems. Thereby these actors can be seen as an integrated part of forces rationalizing and scientizing the physical and social environment (Meyer, 2000).

This position indicates good prospects of future success for these, especially in Europe, increasingly dominating actors (Kipping et al, 1999; Furusten and Bäcklund, 1999). However, by aligning to and reinforcing these kind of myths, global consultants give room for critical research, that from a European perspective includes concerns regarding converging effects of an US-dominated management advice industry (i.e. Clark, 1995; Engwall, 1997; Kipping, 1998; Poulfelt and Payne, 1994). The continued success of global consultancies in supporting the three myths simultaneously represents a major challenge for the great number of local actors on the European management-consulting scene to "reclaim the streets".

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